

Reclaiming Sita: A Feminist Reinterpretation of the Ramayana by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Lens

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Abstract:

This paper examines Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's reinterpretation of Sita in her works, focusing on how she transforms Sita from a traditionally submissive figure into a self-reliant warrior. Divakaruni's narratives challenge patriarchal structures and reclaim Sita's agency, aligning with broader efforts to decolonise literary interpretations of Indian mythology. By reimagining Sita as a woman who does not need a saviour, Divakaruni critiques traditional gender roles and offers a nuanced perspective on women's empowerment. This study situates Divakaruni's work within the context of decolonising literary studies, highlighting the intersections of mythology, gender, and cultural identity.

Keywords: Sita, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, feminist reinterpretation, Ramayana, decolonisation, self-reliance, warrior, Indian mythology.

Introduction:

The *Ramayana*, one of India's most beloved ancient epics, has stereotypically presented Sita as the ultimate symbol of devotion, sacrifice and submission. But modern feminist writers, such as Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, have shaped Sita into a character of resilience and agency. Her own writings break away from these traditionally patriarchal interpretations of the *Ramayana*, like her novel *The Forest of Enchantments*. This paper will elucidate how Divakaruni's representation of Sita as a self-sufficient warrior plays a role in the decolonisation of literary studies and the restoration of Indic ethics. By offering the image of Sita as a "self-reliant warrior," she challenges the traditional view that women in Indian ancient texts were simply submissive or powerless.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni instead emphasizes Sita's inner power, her capacity for self-determination, and her ability to withstand adversity. This reimagining opposes the colonial propensity to oversimplify and exoticize Indian cultural narratives in addition to criticizing the patriarchal dynamics seen in the *Ramayana*. Sita is frequently portrayed in traditional *Ramayana* interpretations as a passive character who depends on Rama to save

her. According to Paula Richman, "many versions of the Ramayana have idealized Sita's devotion to Rama, often at the expense of her own agency" (Richman 45).

These conventional narratives have been criticized by feminist researchers who contend that they uphold patriarchal standards. In her essay *Lady Sings the Blues*, Nabaneeta Dev Sen makes the case that Sita's quiet in the epic is sometimes misunderstood as submission rather than a sign of resistance (Sen 78).

A new interpretation of Sita's personality can be found in *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. She challenges the idea that Sita requires a savior by showing her as a strong, resilient lady. According to Divakaruni, "Sita's strength lies in her capacity to navigate it with grace and determination, rather than in her ability to endure suffering" (Divakaruni 112). This essay uses a qualitative textual study of *The Forest of Enchantments* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, emphasizing significant sections that demonstrate Sita's autonomy and agency. The study also makes use of secondary sources, such as literary studies works on decolonization and feminist criticisms of the *Ramayana*. The patriarchal conventions that have historically influenced how the Ramayana is interpreted are also criticized in Divakaruni's book. Sita's sentiments on her agnipariksha (trial by fire), for instance, emphasize the psychological and psychological expenses associated with patriarchal expectations. "Why must I prove my worth through fire, while his word is enough to condemn me?" she asks, questioning the justice of a system that requires evidence of her purity but does not make the same demands of Rama. (Divakaruni 189). This critique argues for a more egalitarian understanding of gender roles and criticizes the double standards that are inherent in patriarchal systems. Feminist criticisms of the *Ramayana* that try to recover Sita's tale from patriarchal interpretations are consistent with Divakaruni's work. According to feminist academics like Madhu Kishwar and Nabaneeta Dev Sen, Sita's image as a meek wife has obscured her grit and resiliency. By portraying Sita as a diverse, nuanced character who exemplifies both conventional values and contemporary feminist goals, Divakaruni's book magnifies these feminist viewpoints. By questioning Eurocentric and colonial interpretations of Indian epics, Divakaruni's reworking of Sita also helps to decolonize literary studies. Indian cultural texts were frequently simplified and exoticized in colonial narratives, which served to further stereotype Indian women as being docile and subservient. Divakaruni challenges these colonial narratives and affirms the significance of indigenous feminist voices in literary debate by reclaiming Sita's story and portraying her as a strong, independent woman.

Sita from Divakaruni is a warrior who bravely tackles hardship rather than a helpless lady. For example, Sita's choice to accompany Rama into the woodland in *The Forest of Enchantments* is shown as an act of agency as opposed to mindless obedience. "Sita chose the forest because she believed in her own strength to survive it, not because she was forced to," according to Divakaruni (Divakaruni 89).

In her reinterpretation, Divakaruni challenges the patriarchal systems that have traditionally kept women in subservient positions. Divakaruni challenges the conventional wisdom that women require male saviors by taking back Sita's voice. According to her, "Sita's story is one of self-discovery and empowerment, rather than one of rescue" (Divakaruni 156). By reclaiming indigenous knowledge, Divakaruni's work supports larger initiatives to decolonize literary studies. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan argues, "The decolonisation of literature involves not only revising curricula but also reclaiming the cultural and spiritual dimensions of our literary consciousness" (Rajan 23)

The Forest of Enchantments, authored by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, is a revolutionary retelling of Sita's story that questions the colonial and patriarchal structures that have traditionally influenced Ramayana interpretations. This study has shed light on Sita's agency, resiliency, and independence through a qualitative textual analysis of significant passages, demonstrating how Divakaruni's writing not only reinterprets Sita's role but also advances the decolonization of literary studies and the revitalization of Indic ethics. Divakaruni challenges conventional narratives that have long restricted women to passive, submissive roles by reclaiming Sita's story and presenting her as a strong, complex, and independent woman. Instead, she offers a vision of womanhood that is both empowering and rich in cultural heritage. The idea that women need saviors or must only find value in their connections with men is contested by Divakaruni's depiction of Sita as a strong, independent woman. Rather, Sita shows herself to be a woman who faces hardship with dignity, willpower, and a strong sense of self. Whether it was her trial by fire, her captivity by Ravana, or her exile in the wilderness, her comments on her experiences show a deep inner strength and a refusal to be defined by the norms of a patriarchal society. In contrast to the conventional portrayal of Sita as a helpless victim, this reimagining not only humanizes her but also elevates her as a symbol of empowerment. The patriarchal systems present in the Ramayana are also criticized in Divakaruni's literature, especially the unfair treatment of women. The inequities of a system that requires evidence of her purity while providing Rama with no such examination are brought to light by Sita's doubts about Rama's judgment and her refusal to accept it without objecting. This criticism is in line with current feminist rhetoric, which aims to promote gender equality and undermine patriarchal conventions. In addition to challenging the epic's patriarchal foundations, Divakaruni pushes readers to reevaluate how cultural narratives have been employed to uphold gender inequalities by giving voice to Sita's suffering, rage, and tenacity. In addition to its feminist implications, *The Forest of Enchantments* contributes to the decolonisation of literary studies by reclaiming Sita's story from colonial and Eurocentric interpretations that have often reduced Indian epics to simplistic, exoticised versions. Divakaruni's nuanced portrayal of Sita resists these colonial distortions, offering instead a narrative that is deeply rooted in Indian cultural traditions while also engaging with contemporary feminist and ethical concerns. This decolonial approach not only enriches our understanding of the *Ramayana* but also asserts the importance of indigenous perspectives in global literary discourse. Ultimately,

Divakaruni's reinterpretation of Sita serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring relevance of ancient texts and their capacity to inspire new ways of thinking about gender, agency, and cultural identity. By presenting Sita as a figure of strength and complexity, Divakaruni not only revitalises Indic ethics but also provides a model for reinterpreting cultural narratives in ways that are inclusive, empowering, and relevant to contemporary audiences. Her writing encourages readers to view Sita as a dynamic and inspirational character whose tale endures across time and cultural boundaries, rather than as a symbol of surrender. In doing so, *The Forest of Enchantments* not only transforms our understanding of the *Ramayana* but also contributes to the ongoing project of decolonising literature and reimagining the possibilities of feminist storytelling.

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